Writing and Reading Letters of Recommendation

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Will you write me a letter of recommendation? How often have you been asked this question? What races through your mind next?

It seems that all of us have been asked at some time or another to write a letter of recommendation. Whether we choose to accommodate the requester, or not, is entirely up to us. Responses can range from a simple, “I’d be happy to” to “I’m sorry but I don’t think I have enough information to write a letter at this time.” Another real consideration is: How do I write a solid letter of reference that correctly portrays the individual? In this article, I will give to you information from research that may help you in the writing of your next letter of recommendation, some mistakes to avoid, and also some tips on reading letters of reference.

Mason and Schroeder (2012) studied 160 letters of reference written from cooperating teachers, principals and university supervisors about student teachers. They found that letters of reference content could be classified into four general areas: Interpersonal Skills, Superlatives, Testimonials, and Teacher Traits. The researchers defined the four categories in the following manner: Interpersonal Skills include words that describe deep personal traits like rapport, empathy, patience, compassion, love, listening skills or caring. Superlatives are words that are used to describe the student teacher like best, outstanding, very, or excellent. Testimonials are words used by letter writers to affirm the student teacher. These words include: great, confident, pleasure, privileged, impressive, support, or best student teacher I ever had. Teacher Traits are words that describe a distinguishing feature and/or proficiency of the student teacher like knowledge, team player, organized, or prepared. The researchers concluded that testimonials were most indicative of letter quality followed by teacher traits and the use of superlatives. Interpersonal Skills were not significant at all in the letters examined. These findings will help to guide us as we engage in the constructing of a letter of reference.

Table 1 visually depicts the breakdown of letters of reference into the four categories defined above. These four categories and their accompanying synonyms can also help the letter writer to vary their narrative.
When writing a letter of reference, it should generally contain four parts (Toglia, 2004).

1. The first paragraph identifies your relationship with the student like cooperating teacher, principal, or university supervisor.
2. The second paragraph should identify the students’ work ethic, academic ability and teaching prowess (Superlatives, Teacher Traits).
3. The third paragraph focuses on the student’s personal qualities and character (Interpersonal Skills).
4. The fourth paragraph summarizes any particular outstanding attributes, finished with a strong recommendation (Testimonials) and concludes with contact number/s and email address where the writer may be reached for follow-up information.

**Common Mistakes by Letter Writers**

There are a number of common mistakes that letter writers make that do not make a letter stronger. Some of these can easily be corrected through careful proofreading. Others need the writer to devote more time to actually outlining what needs to be said. For example,
letter writers often leave out not only their relationship to the student teacher, but may also leave out their signature block entirely, leaving the reader with no idea where the letter of reference came from. Some writers overuse words or phrases like *above and beyond* as in “She goes above and beyond what is expected.” Other worn-out words include *asset* as in “He will be a great asset to whatever school hires him” or *very* as in “She is very good.”

Some letter writers focus on teaching material/programs, curriculum, structure of the class or student placement rather than centering on the teacher as a person. What the reader wants to know, is who is this person and why should I hire them? What can you tell me about their *Teacher Traits or Interpersonal Skills*?

A letter writer can safely say all that needs to be said in one page. A common mistake is to write the letter of reference longer than it needs to be. Keep in mind that the letter writer is writing for the reader of the reference letter and a one page reference letter is typically the norm.

Putting all the written suggestions to work, a simplified letter of reference which contains four paragraphs mentioned by Toglia (2004) might look something like the following:

In Example 1, you can pick up on the general positive letter written by the cooperating teacher. The student teacher is a team player, caring and has great rapport with students. The most powerful statement comes in the last paragraph where the cooperating teacher states or gives *Testimonial* on how many student teachers she has had and that this one ranks as the best. An administrator would certainly want to pursue this candidate further.
Example 1

XX/XX/XXX

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: Wanna Teach

It is a pleasure to write this letter on behalf of Miss Teach. I had the honor of working with Miss Teach in second grade during the fall semester of the 2014-2015 school year at Further East Elementary School.

A third grade classroom of 24 students with a wide academic range provided the background for Miss Teach’s experience. She incorporates many new learning strategies into her academic and behavioral repertoire. She constructed lessons where many learning abilities were met through tactile, auditory, and visual experiences. Miss Teach incorporated the use of manipulatives, technology and higher level thinking skills into her lessons.

Miss Teach is a true team player. She has a caring attitude toward those she works with and always promotes student success. Her rapport with staff and students is impressive.

Miss Teach is the eighth student teacher I have worked with and she is, by far, the best I have had. I highly recommend Miss Teach as I consider her to be a great benefit to any teaching staff.

Cooperating Teacher

Further East Elementary School

Home phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX

Cell phone XXX-XXX-XXXX

Email address: Xxxxxx@xxxx-xxxx
Example 2

XX/XX/XXXX

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: Wanna Teach

Miss Teach has been a student teacher in my first grade classroom from September through January, 2016. We have 500 students in our school and 22 in my classroom.

We focus on literacy instruction and Response to Intervention. Miss Teach has experienced balanced literacy, Daily 5, Everyday math, FOSSS science, and technology resources including the SMART board. Miss Teach is beginning to develop an understanding of how these elements look in a classroom and I am confident that with continued experience and professional growth her understanding and her ability to implement them will continue to grow.

Students will certainly miss her in the classroom every day. As she continues in teaching, she will further develop her teacher assertiveness with a class.

I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with Miss Teach. Miss Teach will work to provide student learning opportunities for the students she teaches.

Cooperating Teacher
Further East Elementary School
Home Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX
Cell Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX
Email Address: Xxxxxx@xxxxx-xxxxx

In Example 2, the letter writer says very little about the student teacher. The writer talks at great length about the class and the various approaches used but real red flags are thrown out that pinpoint such items as: “As she continues to develop her skills” and “Miss Teach will continue to work...” These phrases will alert an administrator to eliminate this student teacher and go on to the next candidate.

Side by side, you can see the marked difference between the two letters of reference. One, praises and says, “Come closer and look at me.” The other, almost begs the administrator to move on. Which one would you like to call in for an interview?


Toglia, T.V. (2004). Writing recommendation letters – without stress. *Tech Directions, 63*(8), 24-